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SUBJECT: Gasoline on a Fire: Serb Leaders' Rhetoric Inflaming Situation

Summary

[¶](#)11. (SBU) In the wake of Kosovo's declaration of independence, Serbian leaders within the Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS) and New Serbia (NS) coalition have publicly incited and inflamed the delicate political situation through continued statements condoning violence as a legitimate response to Kosovo's loss. Even in the week following the attacks on diplomatic missions in Serbia, DSS-NS ministers, specifically Velimir Ilic and Slobodan Samardzic, have only passively condemned the violence directed towards the international community, while Ilic has also directed rage-laden rhetoric against domestic opponents. Above this hardline nationalist chest thumping, a few leaders within the Democratic (DS) and G-17 Plus parties have shown the guts to speak out against inflammatory statements, but they have yet to gain any significant traction. Post has become increasingly vocal in singling out those individuals who incite violent behavior and has demanded that they be held accountable. End Summary.

Ilic: Condoning Violence and Targeting Opponents

[¶](#)12. (SBU) New Serbia leader and Infrastructure Minister within the coalition government, Velimir Ilic continues to carry the banner of hardline nationalist rhetoric. Since Kosovo's declaration of independence, some of his remarks have condoned violence. Most recently his statements have targeted democratic opposition leaders, falsely blaming them for instigating the riots. On February 18, after the first riots against diplomatic missions, Ilic attempted to legitimize violence as a means to express Serbia's outrage about Kosovo when he told the press that, "breaking windows is democracy." On February 22, responding to the attacks against embassies the night before, Ilic said to a rally in Central Serbia that, "Some ambassadors, considering what they deserve, fared really well."

[¶](#)13. (SBU) Taking a different tactic to distance himself from the violence, on February 28, Ilic said that "traitor groups," including the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), had organized the February 21 riots in order to overshadow the peaceful and dignified national protest, according to B92. When asked if people who did not share the government's position were safe in Serbia, Ilic said, "We cannot protect people who are conducting operations, stating that Kosovo is not ours, from getting beaten up by someone who has come from Kosovo." Following the LDP's accusations that the minister was spreading hatred, Ilic said, "the LDP condemns everything that smells like Serbia," adding, "it is shameful that such a political option even exists." Contacts in the LDP told poloff on February 29 that the party would file a libel suit against Ilic.

Samardzic: Violence a Response to Western Actions

[¶](#)14. (SBU) As point person for the coalition government's Kosovo

policy, Kosovo Minister Slobodan Samardzic, DSS, described violence against UNMIK as an expected reaction, given the West's support for Kosovo's independence. On February 20, Samardzic told B92 that the destruction of police checkpoints along the Serbia-Kosovo border was a direct reaction by the Serb population in Kosovo. "I believe that it is legitimate. It may not be nice, but it is legitimate," he said. After the attack on the U.S. Embassy, Samardzic told international media on February 24 that the "basis of all violent acts was the violation of international law" with Kosovo's declaration of independence, which began "a chain of events." "The United States is the main culprit ... for all those violent acts," he said. On February 25, Samardzic issued a statement saying he wanted to "continue to calming and stabilizing the situation" in Kosovo, but did not directly condemn the violence or his previous remarks.

Individual Leaders in DS and G17 Begin to Speak Up

¶5. (SBU) Several DS and G-17 ministers have begun to refute the hardline nationalist rhetoric but their statements are still sporadic and uncoordinated. Defense Minister Dragan Sutanovac said on February 22 that the violence in the city was "one of Belgrade's saddest days." Sutanovac said "nationalist politicians" had fueled the riots. On the night of the attacks, Sutanovac personally went to B92, which was a target of attacks, to help guarantee its safety.

On February 28, Economy Minister Mladen Dinkic (G-17), publicly protested against the DSS -NS Kosovo policy and stated that he could not "tolerate the battle for preserving the country's sovereignty being turned into widespread collective hysteria." In response to the DSS policy of not engaging with countries that recognize Kosovo, Dinkic said, "Are we in a concentration camp here? We cannot allow things like this." On March 2, Dinkic spoke out against the DSS's provocative statements, stating that DSS officials were "abundant with idiotic, foolish comments as if they were competing for a boss' sympathies." A G-17 contact told poloff on February 29 that Dinkic would become more vocal in the weeks to come, but acknowledged that the party was not coordinating or enlisting others.

Comment

¶6. (SBU) The unapologetic, and at times inflammatory comments by hardline nationalists, led by Ilic and Samardzic, continue to incite the delicate political situation in Serbia. Though numerically small, the DSS and NS maintain the upper hand in the political arena as a result of the near silence from the DS. The recent comments by both Sutanovac and Dinkic are evidence that some democratic leaders are beginning to find their voice and courage to speak up, but they have yet to coordinate their messages, limiting their effectiveness.

Post has begun singling out hardline nationalists and demanding the government hold them accountable for their words and the actions that they trigger. Post will continue this effort and will continue to encourage democratic leaders to speak up against incendiary remarks and the nationalists that promote them. End Comment.

MUNTER